

APRIL

DEVOTIONAL JOURNAL 2017

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EZRA 5:11 (ESV)

COVENANT EFC

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Also available at www.cefc.org.sg and “Covenant EFC” mobile app.

MEMORY FOCUS

EZRA & HAGGAI (ESV)

2017

JANUARY

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing...

EZRA 1:1

FEBRUARY

And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.

EZRA 3:11

MARCH

But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.

EZRA 5:5

APRIL

And this was their reply to us: "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished."

EZRA 5:11

MAY

Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?

HAGGAI 1:4

JUNE

You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes.

HAGGAI 1:6

JULY

Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the LORD. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the LORD. Work, for I am with you, declares the LORD of hosts...

HAGGAI 2:4

AUGUST

For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

EZRA 7:10

SEPTEMBER

I took courage, for the hand of the LORD my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

EZRA 7:28B

OCTOBER

The hand of our God was on us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way.

EZRA 8:31B

NOVEMBER

And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this...

EZRA 9:13

DECEMBER

Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it.

EZRA 10:4

FOREWORD BY SENIOR PASTORS

Vision 2028 is spurring Covenant EFC to fulfil her Intentional Disciple Making Church (IDMC) mission within the Church, in our nation and among the nations.

A local church with a national and global influence. A people with devotion, depth and destiny. God has given Acts 20:28 as a spiritual anchor for our journey towards Vision 2028.

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” – Acts 20:28 (ESV)

At last year’s Listening Retreat, God continued to urge us to possess the following:

A Firm FOUNDATION in God

“For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations ...”
– Hebrews 11:10a (ESV)

Jesus Christ is the firm foundation of Covenant EFC. Laying a firm foundation for a healthy church means seeking, knowing, loving and proclaiming Christ (Phil 3). How are you building your foundation in Christ today? Your daily devotion is the best place to start!

A Bold FAITH in God’s Faithfulness

“And without faith, it is impossible to please God because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” – Hebrews 11:6 (NIV)

A bold faith opposes doubt which slows us, opposes fear which paralyses us and opposes apathy which derails us. Bold faith in God’s faithfulness means our allegiance is unto God. Luke 6:46 says, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and not do what I tell you?” There is a holy dissatisfaction with our lukewarmness, fear and apathy. Our bold faith in God will see Him restore our spiritual zeal and do far greater things beyond Vision 2028 (Psa 80). How can you be bold in your faith in Christ today? How about B.L.E.S.S.-ing those around you who have yet to know Him?

A Burning Focus Towards FRUITFULNESS for God

“... whose designer and builder is God ...” – Hebrews 11:10b (ESV)

God is the Designer and has a destiny for us! God is the Builder and has the resources! He showed us a promise in Isaiah 37:30-31, “And this shall be a sign for you: this year you shall eat what grows of itself, and in the second year what springs from that. Then in the third year sow and reap, and plant vineyards, and eat their fruit. And the surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again take root downward and bear fruit upward.” Authentic discipleship is about people, not just programmes. Intentional Disciplemaking is about reproducing people of *A Certain Kind*, not just attending an event. In the process of making disciples, we must not lose sight of the end result of fruitfulness. Will you pray for God to make you fruitful as you abide in Him daily? Are you ready for the harvest of fruitfulness that He has promised?

This year as we “Return to Our Foundation”, Covenant EFC’s pulpit and Devotional Journal will be mostly based on the books of Ezra and Haggai. May you have a blessed year of studying, practising and teaching God’s Word (Ezr 7:10)!

In Christ,

Rev Tony Yeo and Rev Tan Kay Kiong

GUIDE TO USING THIS DEVOTIONAL JOURNAL

1 Prepare your heart in God's presence

- Select a fixed time (preferably in the morning before you begin your day) and a quiet place where you can be alone and undisturbed.
- Observe a moment of silence as you acknowledge God's presence. Centre down.
- Begin with a song of worship. Meditate on the lyrics even if you are unfamiliar with the tune. (Refer to the list of worship songs provided.)
- Ask God to open your heart to hear Him.

The English Standard Version (ESV) is the default Bible version translation unless otherwise specified.

SOMETHING TO PONDER...

Examining your life is essential in your faith journey. Your redeemed life as a disciple of Christ deserves careful examining. May you take root and bear fruit in Him!

WHAT'S NEW IN 2017?

Prayer pointers for Pastors and Staff are included every Tuesday. On each Friday, there is a prayer pointer for Lay Leaders (e.g. Board Members, Zone Mentors, CG Leaders, Assistant CG Leaders, and Ministry Leaders), to facilitate your prayer for whoever God brings to your mind at that time.

2 Allow God to S.O.A.P. you with His Word and Spirit

- **Scripture** – Take your time to meditate on the Scripture passage for the day. Pause and mull over words and phrases that stand out to you.
- **Observation** – Jot down significant insights and reflections from the passage you have read. You may use the guiding questions provided. *The “Deeper Reflection” section is to aid your contemplation of the Scripture. It is not to replace your own observation, for the Holy Spirit illuminates the Scripture to you as you seek Him earnestly.*
- **Application** – Note down a specific and practical commitment to God's Word for you. Is there a command to obey, a sin to avoid, an example to follow, or a principle to live out? Where appropriate, share your devotional entry with someone.
- **Prayer** – Bring your heartfelt response to God in prayer.

WORSHIP SONGS

MARCH – APRIL

WONDERFUL GOD

Verse 1

There is no other God like You
Who made the heavens and the earth
And fills my heart with joy unending
All I can do is give my life
Offer to You a sacrifice
Here is my heart for You unending

Bridge

All of my life, belongs to You alone
With every breath, my song will rise to You

Chorus

You are the joy of every nation
The giver of salvation
Wonderful God
You are God throughout the ages
Enthroned upon our praises
Wonderful God

Verse 2

Every morning when I rise
It is Your presence I desire
To see Your faithfulness unending
Mercy and goodness follow me
For in Your presence I am free
I put my trust in You unending

Denis Campos

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CCLI Song # 5427037

FOREVER

Verse 1

Give thanks to the Lord, our God and King
His love endures forever
For He is good, He is above all things
His love endures forever
Sing praise, sing praise

Verse 2

With a mighty hand and an outstretched arm
His love endures forever
For a life that's been reborn
His love endures forever

Pre-chorus

Sing praise, sing praise
Sing praise, sing praise

Chorus

Forever God is faithful
Forever God is strong
Forever God is with us
Forever and ever

Verse 3

From the rising to the setting sun
His love endures forever
And by the grace of God we will carry on
His love endures forever
Sing praise, sing praise
Sing praise, sing praise

Bridge

His love endures forever
His love endures forever
His love endures forever
Forever

Chris Tomlin

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CCLI Song # 3148428

BE THOU MY VISION (SLANE)

Verse 1

Be Thou my vision
O Lord of my heart
Naught be all else to me
Save that Thou art
Thou my best thought
By day or by night
Waking or sleeping
Thy presence my light

Verse 2

Be Thou my wisdom
And Thou my true Word
I ever with Thee
And Thou with me Lord
Thou my great Father
And I Thy true son
Thou in me dwelling
And I with Thee one

Verse 3

Riches I heed not
Nor man's empty praise
Thou mine inheritance
Now and always
Thou and Thou only
First in my heart
High King of heaven
My treasure Thou art

Verse 4

High King of heaven
My victory won
May I reach heaven's joys
O bright heaven's sun
Heart of my own heart
Whatever befall
Still be my vision
O Ruler of all
Still be my vision
O Ruler of all

Eleanor Henrietta Hull | Mary Elizabeth Byrne |
Tony Guerrero
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CCLI Song # 4487119

COME THOU FOUNT OF EVERY BLESSING (NETTLETON)

Verse 1

Come, Thou fount of ev'ry blessing
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace
Streams of mercy never ceasing
Call for songs of loudest praise
Teach me some melodious sonnet
Sung by flaming tongues above
Praise the mount I'm fixed upon it
Mount of Thy redeeming love

Verse 2

Here I raise my Ebenezer
Hither by Thy help I'm come
And I hope by Thy good pleasure
Safely to arrive at home
Jesus sought me when a stranger
Wand'ring from the fold of God
He, to rescue me from danger
Interposed His precious blood

Verse 3

O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be
Let Thy grace Lord like a fetter
Bind my wand'ring heart to Thee
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it
Prone to leave the God I love
Here's my heart, Lord take and seal it
Seal it for Thy courts above

John Wyeth | Robert Robinson
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CCLI Song # 108389

JUST AS I AM

Verse 1

Just as I am without one plea
 But that Thy blood was shed for me
 And that Thou bidst me come to Thee
 O Lamb of God, I come, I come

Verse 2

Just as I am and waiting not
 To rid my soul of one dark blot
 To Thee whose blood can cleanse each spot
 O Lamb of God, I come, I come

Chorus

I come broken to be mended
 I come wounded to be healed
 I come desperate to be rescued
 I come empty to be filled

I come guilty to be pardoned
 By the blood of Christ the Lamb
 And I'm welcomed with open arms
 Praise God, just as I am

Verse 3

Just as I am I would be lost
 But mercy and grace my freedom bought
 And now to glory in Your cross
 O Lamb of God, I come, I come

Ending

Praise God, just as I am
 Just as I am

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 CCLI Song # 5635850

THE SERVANT KING

Verse 1

From heave'n You came helpless babe
 Entere'd our world Your glory veile'd
 Not to be served but to serve
 And give Your life that we might live

Chorus

This is our God the Servant King
 He calls us now to follow Him
 To bring our lives as a daily offering
 Of worship to the Servant King

Verse 2

There in the garden of tears
 My heavy load He chose to bear
 His heart with sorrow was torn
 Yet not my will but Yours He said

Verse 3

Come see His hands and His feet
 The scars that speak of sacrifice
 Hands that flung stars into space
 To cruel nails surrendered

Verse 4

So let us learn how to serve
 And in our lives enthrone Him
 Each other's needs to prefer
 For it is Christ we're serving

Graham Kendrick
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 CCLI Song # 78897

HEART OF A SERVANT

Verse 1

Standing in awe of your grace
 Setting my feet in your ways
 Entering into your presence
 To behold you face to face

Verse 2

God of all heaven and earth
 Holding me in your embrace
 Unfailing love that surrounds me
 Oh... God I stand amazed

Chorus

My Jesus, my lord
 You're the love of my life
 Wherever you go
 Wanna be by your side
 No longer I
 But Christ living in me
 Serving you for all eternity

My eyes set on you
 In this race that I run
 No longer my ways
 Let your will be done
 Make me a servant
 My heart's ever true
 Clinging to the cross
 I'll follow you
 I'll follow you

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THY WORD

Chorus

Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet
 And a light unto my path
 Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet
 And a light unto my path

Verse 1

When I feel afraid
 And I think I've lost my way
 Still You're there right beside me
 Nothing will I fear
 As long as You are near
 Please be near me to the end

Verse 2

I will not forget
 Your love for me and yet
 My heart forever is wandering
 Jesus be my guide
 And hold me to Your side
 I will love You to the end

Amy Grant | Michael W. Smith

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 CCLI Song # 14301

SPIRIT TOUCH YOUR CHURCH

Verse 1

Lord we need Your grace and mercy
 We need to pray like never before
 We need the power of Your Holy Spirit
 To open Heaven's door

Chorus

Spirit touch Your church
 Stir the hearts of men
 Revive us, Lord
 With Your passion once again
 I want to care for others
 Like Jesus cares for me
 Let Your rain fall upon me
 Let Your rain fall upon me

Verse 2

Lord we humbly come before You
 We don't deserve of You what we ask
 But we yearn to see Your glory
 Restore this dying land

Ending

Let Your rain fall upon me

Kim Bollinger

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CCLI Song # 451861

THE LION AND THE LAMB

Verse 1

He's coming on the clouds
 Kings and kingdoms will bow down
 And every chain will break
 As broken hearts declare His praise
 For who can stop the Lord almighty

Chorus

Our God is the Lion
 The Lion of Judah
 He's roaring with power
 And fighting our battles
 And every knee will bow before Him
 Our God is the Lamb
 The Lamb that was slain
 For the sins of the world
 His blood breaks the chains
 And every knee will bow before the Lion and the Lamb
 Oh every knee will bow before the Lion and the Lamb

Verse 2

So open up the gates
 Make way before the King of kings
 Our God who comes to save
 Is here to set the captives free
 For who can stop the Lord almighty

Bridge

Who can stop the Lord almighty
 Who can stop the Lord almighty

Brenton Brown | Brian Johnson | Leeland Mooring

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CCLI Song # 7038281

THE CHURCH BEYOND

PRAY FOR INDONESIA

“For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.”

– ISAIAH 61:11 (ESV)

Indonesia has the world’s largest Muslim population, the vast majority of whom practise a moderate form of Islam. Indonesia has a diverse population with over 750 distinct people groups. Nearly 100 million people can be regarded as unevangelised.

Praise God:

- For the sustained growth of the Church over the last 50 years
- For the lives and vibrant witness of committed Christians which have made an impact on a society that is otherwise influenced by the occult



Pray:

- For the binding of these occult powers and for continued growth of the Church in the midst of intense opposition and growing persecution as a result of the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism.
- For a vision for evangelisation. That every church will be a viable witnessing church for every people group in the country.
- For the development of effective lay leadership. The need is heightened by rapidly multiplying Pentecostal and charismatic churches all over Indonesia. Pray for Covenant EFC which has partnered with some of the local churches to train leaders in authentic discipleship. Pray that this will bring up a generation of mature Christians who are serious about God and evangelism.

SATURDAY, 1 APRIL 2017

Unfathomable Divine Silence and Absence

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 1:1-4, 7-8; 3:7; 4:3-5

OBSERVATION

What observations can you make about the references to Cyrus king of Persia at the various points of the returned exiles' mission of rebuilding the temple in Ezra 1:1 – 4:5 (vv.1-4, 7-8; Ezr 3:7; 4:3-5)?

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Deeper Reflection

There was a **political incongruence** in the development of events in the returned exiles' mission of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. Observe the progressive mention of "Cyrus king of Persia" in Ezra 1:1 – 4:5. Cyrus made a decree for the exiles to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple (vv.1-4) and for the articles of the temple seized by Nebuchadnezzar to be returned there (vv.7-8). The supply of cedar wood from Lebanon was "according to the permission from Cyrus" (Ezr 3:7). The returned exiles stood against the enemies' initial opposition to their rebuilding of the temple with "as King Cyrus has commanded us" (Ezr 4:3). But ironically, despite such great favour from Cyrus, the enemies succeeded in discouraging, frightening and frustrating the builders in the work "all the days of Cyrus" (Ezr 4:4-5). But more significantly was an apparent **theological incongruence**. The work on God's house was stopped by the enemies, even though it was enveloped by the faithful Word of God (v.1) and the fervent worship to God (Ezr 3:10-13). The divine presence in Ezra 1-3 suddenly and strangely turned into the divine silence and apparent divine absence in Ezra 4:1-5.

APPLICATION

What is my response when God is unfathomably silent and "absent" in my life?

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PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

SUNDAY, 2 APRIL 2017

SCRIPTURE

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OBSERVATION

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APPLICATION

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PRAYER

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THE PAST WEEK

Review

What was my high point and my low point for the week?

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What gave me life and what drained me?

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How was the Spirit of God at work?

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Reflect

What is one key thing that God said to me this week in light of what has happened?

Respond

What is one thing I need to do in light of what God is saying?
COMMIT IN PRAYER.

FAMILY DEVOTIONAL • WEEK 1 • APRIL 2017

WHY CAN'T I HIT BACK?

Do not repay wrong with wrong, but with good.

Scripture: Romans 12:17-21; 1 Peter 3:9

★ ACTIVITY BITE

Talk to one another about bad things that people can do to one another, like stealing money or bullying someone.

★ CHAT TIME

Q1: Why is it wrong to steal or bully a weaker person?

Q2: How do you feel and what would you do if someone did bad things to you?

Q3: In Romans 12:17-21, why does God want us to repay evil with good?

★ LEARNING POINT

People choose to do wrong things for many reasons. Perhaps it is to get what they want, or maybe they want to hurt others. When we are wronged, we feel hurt and angry. Sometimes out of anger we feel like hitting back because it makes us feel good. We feel we have the right to do so to even the score since they hurt us first. But this is not the way of God. He is a God of love, not of evil. Instead of getting even, we can show the love of Jesus by blessing others (1 Pet 3:9) because we are children of God. Jesus will give us the strength and love to do so. Through our good deeds, we hope that those who hurt us will believe that Jesus loves them too.

★ ACTION POINT

Write down some good things you can do to bless others when they hurt you. It can be giving of bookmarks with Bible verses, or even praying for them to receive God's blessing. Be prepared to do them if you are hurt.

★ PRAYER POWER

(Ask your children to pray after you.)

Dear God, please help me bless others when they hurt me instead of getting even. I want to be like Jesus who always loves everybody. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

TUESDAY, 4 APRIL 2017

“The Rebellious and Evil City”

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 4:11-20

OBSERVATION

What did it mean to the returned exiles to have Jerusalem be called “the rebellious and evil city” (v.12) as they looked at themselves before and after the exile to Babylon?

Deeper Reflection

The clear theological message of Ezra 4 is: When we walk with God and do His work according to His will, there will surely be opposition from God’s enemies. Theologically, this is spiritual warfare. In spiritual warfare we ought to stand firm (cf. Eph 6:11, 13-14) in this critical position: **that what we are is true before God.** To the enemies of the returned exiles, what could be more effective to stop the rebuilding of Jerusalem than a decree from the most powerful person in the known world then? In their letter to King Artaxerxes, they described Jerusalem as “the rebellious and evil city” (vv.11-12). Is that true? Yes in the pre-exilic past, but no in the post-exilic present. Indeed, the people of God had failed God enormously; but now, God has forgiven and restored them, and He is with them, rebuilding their lives according to His “plans” that give them “a future and a hope” (Jer 29:10-11). This is what is true about Jerusalem before God. Labelling Jerusalem as a “rebellious and evil city” was only the enemies’ malicious slander and false accusation. Are you still allowing your awful sinful past to make you feel guilty, even though God has already forgiven and restored you to Himself in Christ?

APPLICATION

How should I deal with my guilt regarding certain sins that I had committed recently?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:
- Pray for pastors and staff:
To seek God’s approval, instead of pleasing man
- Pray for significant people:
- Pray for those in need:
- Pray for self:

WEDNESDAY, 5 APRIL 2017

“If That City Is Rebuilt...”

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 4:11-20

OBSERVATION

In what ways is the warning to King Artaxerxes about the consequences of Jerusalem being rebuilt (vv.13, 16) true or untrue?

Deeper Reflection

In spiritual warfare, we must stand firm in another critical position: **that what we do is right before God.** In rebuilding Jerusalem, the returned exiles were doing what was right before God, because it was according to God’s will. However, their enemies warned King Artaxerxes: “If that city is rebuilt...they will not pay tribute, custom or toll, and it will damage the revenue of the kings” (v.13), and the king “will have no possession in the province Beyond the River” (v.16). At that time, Artaxerxes was bothered by revolts in Egypt and attacks by the Greeks, and naturally he would listen seriously when his provincial officials warned him that Jews were planning to revolt in Jerusalem by rebuilding the city.⁴ But this was plain exaggeration with “a good deal of political fearmongering”⁵. The Jews were “not strong enough to withhold taxes, and even if they did, it would not amount to much money”⁶. And they were too small and weak a group to be of any threat to the mighty Persian Empire. When what we do is right before God, we need not lose heart despite momentary obstacles or setbacks. For doing God’s will and God’s work does not exclude “and yet Satan hindered us” (1 Thess 2:18).

APPLICATION

What is my perspective and posture when things go wrong as I am doing what is right before God?

PRAYER

Lord, help me to be steadfast and single-minded in answering Your call for my life faithfully. Grant me Your grace and peace, and keep me from being distracted, disturbed or discouraged by what circumstances are telling me, what people think about me and how people look at me, which are not true before You. Amen.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

⁴ Gary V. Smith, *Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary (Tyndale, 2010), 47

⁵ Gary V. Smith, 49

⁶ Gary V. Smith, 49

THURSDAY, 6 APRIL 2017

To Follow in His Steps

SCRIPTURE

1 Peter 2:18-23

OBSERVATION

What characterises “suffering unjustly” according to verses 18 to 23?

Deeper Reflection

We “have been called” to a particular “purpose” (v.21): “suffering unjustly” (v.19). Take note that it is a calling. But we must look at suffering unjustly with a larger Christological vision: Christ “suffered for you” (v.21). And He suffered for us unjustly. Why unjustly? Because it was the righteous who suffered and died for the unrighteous — you and me, so that the unrighteous can become righteous before God. That is unjust suffering! But, having received the eternal benefits from this unjust suffering, we are “to follow in His steps” (v.21) in suffering unjustly. Christ “committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth” (v.22), and yet He was called “an evildoer” (Jn 18:30). But Pilate’s judicial verdict of Jesus was: “I find no guilt in Him” (Jn 18:38). Not guilty, but He was still “scourged”, slapped and humiliated (Jn 19:1-3). After this unjust treatment, Pilate said again: “I find no guilt in Him” (Jn 19:4). However, the crowd’s persistent cry of “Crucify Him!” drowned out Pilate’s third “I find no guilt in Him” (Jn 19:6, 15-16). We may have to suffer unjustly until we die — just like Christ. But let us keep entrusting ourselves “to Him who judges righteously” (v.23) — just like Christ.

APPLICATION

What is my attitude when I undergo suffering unjustly?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

FRIDAY, 7 APRIL 2017

It'll Never Be the Final Curtain!

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 4:23-24; Nehemiah 1:1-11; 2:1-8

OBSERVATION

What observations can you make about God from the halt in the rebuilding of Jerusalem (v.23) and Nehemiah's attempt to rebuild it years later (Neh 1:1-11; 2:1-8)?

Deeper Reflection

The returned exiles' attempt to rebuild the temple was stopped (v.24) and so was the attempt to rebuild Jerusalem almost a century later (v.23). About 60 years after the temple was completely rebuilt (Ezr 6:14), Ezra went up to Jerusalem with the favour of King Artaxerxes (Ezr 7:11-13, 27-28). Sometime later, the attempt to rebuild Jerusalem was made, but the same King Artaxerxes stopped it (Ezr 4:7-23). Then some years later, Nehemiah, who served as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes (Neh 1:11b; 2:1), learned that "the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire" (Neh 1:1-3). Apparently, the provincial authorities had overstepped the royal decree just to stop the Jews from rebuilding Jerusalem (vv.21-23).⁷ Filled with the burden to rebuild the broken-down city, Nehemiah prayed to God that King Artaxerxes, who stopped the previous rebuilding of Jerusalem, may permit him to do so (Neh 11:11). God answered his prayer (Neh 2:1-8). However strong and long may the opposition to God's purposes be, it will never be the final curtain. God will revive His work again and again. Nehemiah's work had barely started when opposition struck again (Neh 2:10, 19)!

APPLICATION

What does it mean for me to know that while God's purposes may appear to have been thwarted, they will never be so ultimately?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:
- Pray for lay leaders:
To rest in the ways of God
- Pray for significant people:
- Pray for those in need:
- Pray for self:

⁷ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (IVP, 1979), 59

SATURDAY, 8 APRIL 2017

Seeing Beyond Kings and Decrees

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 4:6-7, 17-24

OBSERVATION

How would you relate God to King Artaxerxes and his decree to stop the rebuilding of Jerusalem (vv.17-23)?

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Deeper Reflection

The word “king” occurs 15 times in Ezra 4, which narrates the long opposition to God’s work of rebuilding in post-exilic times. “King” in Ezra 4 refers mainly to four Persian kings (vv.5-7). Kings were the most powerful human beings. The Persian kings dominate the narrative as the ones who determined when God’s work of rebuilding would start or stop (vv.5, 19-21, 23). It is so easy for us to see just this picture, and not beyond it. When US President Donald Trump was inaugurated as “the most powerful man in the world”, I reflected on Isaiah 6:1-3, as I awaited the geopolitical developments around the world. The geopolitical scene in Isaiah’s days was somewhat similar to ours today. When Uzziah was king, it was the second Golden Age of Judah (2 Chron 26), as was during Solomon’s reign. “The year of King Uzziah’s death” (Isa 6:1) threw Judah into a political crisis, having lost a capable king and being under the threat of Assyria — the most powerful nation then. What struck me was Isaiah’s words: “I saw” (Isa 6:1). I asked myself, “What do I see in a geopolitically uncertain and unstable world?” Do I see “the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted”?

APPLICATION

What does it mean for me to believe in the sovereignty of God in situations which are out of control?

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PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

SUNDAY, 9 APRIL 2017

SCRIPTURE

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OBSERVATION

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APPLICATION

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PRAYER

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THE PAST WEEK

Review

What was my high point and my low point for the week?

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What gave me life and what drained me?

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How was the Spirit of God at work?

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Reflect

What is one key thing that God said to me this week in light of what has happened?

Respond

What is one thing I need to do in light of what God is saying?
COMMIT IN PRAYER.

FAMILY DEVOTIONAL • WEEK 2 • APRIL 2017

WHY MUSTN'T I SHOW FAVOURITISM?

Treat one another with equal respect and love.

Scripture: James 2:1-9; Philippians 2:3-4

★ ACTIVITY BITE

Lay out all your toys on a table. Arrange them in a line, starting from your most favourite item down to the least favourite one.

★ CHAT TIME

Q1: Why are some of your toys more fun to play with than others?

Q2: Should you treat some friends better than others because they are popular or have nice things? Why?

Q3: In James 2:1-9, why does God command us not to show favouritism?

★ LEARNING POINT

We show favouritism by treating some people better than others. We consider them as being better, more important and deserving of the good things in life. However, others don't get as much attention or respect; maybe they don't look as pretty or dress as nicely as others. Sometimes they are criticised or judged because of their race. God created all people to be in His image and no one is less valuable or important. He loves each one of us equally and Jesus died for every person on earth. We should learn to treat everyone with equal importance even though you may not like the way they do certain things or behave in a certain manner.

★ ACTION POINT

Think of someone in your class who may be very quiet, unpopular or often left out of games. Try talking more to that person and include him or her in your activities.

★ PRAYER POWER

(Ask your children to pray after you.)

Lord Jesus, thank You that I am just as important as anyone else in this world to You. I want to treat others equally. Help me to love those who are unloved. Amen.

MONDAY, 10 APRIL 2017

Journeying to Jerusalem

SCRIPTURE

Luke 9:51-56

OBSERVATION

What does it mean for Jesus to “set his face to go to” (v.51, ESV) or “resolutely set out for” (v.51, NIV) Jerusalem?

Deeper Reflection

Verses 51 to 56 mark the beginning of the travel narrative of Jesus’ journey towards Jerusalem where Jesus would fulfil His destiny (Lk 9:31).⁸ In radical obedience to the Father, Jesus began the journey, moving resolutely towards the cross. Each step required Jesus to deny Himself in order to fully follow His Father’s will. Each step brought Jesus one step closer to the fulfilment of God’s redemptive purpose for sinful humanity. Jesus would not delay, take a detour or be distracted. It was not just an external journey over geographical terrain and physical distances. It was at its core an internal journey of absolute surrender, where Jesus kept a deep resolve and fixed His eyes, heart and mind on the Father’s purposes. Opposition was expected along the way, but Jesus was determined to obey His Father.⁹ For example, the Samaritans rejected Jesus (vv.52-53), because the Samaritans did not accept Jerusalem as the place where God should be worshipped (Jn 4:20).¹⁰ However, Jesus would not be distracted by anyone’s outright rejection or open hostility, because His focus was on obeying His Father, even to the extent of dying on a cross. Jesus’ wholehearted commitment reminds us that discipleship is not merely about committing to having more to-do items on a respectable checklist. Fundamentally, our discipleship must be about being single-minded, where we set our faces and hearts to follow our Lord Jesus in all aspects of our lives, come what may.

APPLICATION

What are the two areas in my life where I need to be wholehearted and single-minded as I journey on in an authentic life of following Christ?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, I am weak and sometimes every part of me desires to stray from You and Your will. Empower me by Your Holy Spirit to stay focused on Jesus even in the face of challenges and temptations. Help me not to be distracted by worldly things and intimidating circumstances. Burn in me a passion to love, obey and follow Jesus my Lord all the days of my life. In His name I pray. Amen.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

⁸ David E. Garland, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series On the New Testament*, vol. 3, Luke (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, ©2011), 408.

⁹ David E. Garland, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series On the New Testament*, vol. 3, Luke (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, ©2011), 413.

¹⁰ *ESV Study Bible*, esv text ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Bibles, 2007), 1974.

TUESDAY, 11 APRIL 2017

Truly Following Jesus

SCRIPTURE

Luke 9:57-62

OBSERVATION

What does it mean to “follow Jesus” and what does it really entail?

Deeper Reflection

It is easy to profess these words: “I will follow You wherever You go” (v.57). However, it is difficult to embrace the cost of following Jesus. People follow Jesus for various reasons. Some follow Jesus for blessings, wisdom or popularity. Not many would want to follow Jesus in His mission to save the lost. Many Christians are attracted to the **idea** of discipleship, but eschew its **reality**. Discipleship **cannot** be separated from Christ’s redemptive mission. In this narrative, Jesus encounters three would-be disciples and debunks their wrong perceptions of what discipleship entails. To the first man, Jesus says that He has nothing to offer people if they are merely seeking prosperity or security.¹¹ In Jesus’ conversation with the second man, Jesus uses a pun in verse 60 to say that the spiritually dead can bury those who are physically dead.¹² Here, Jesus is not going against the social norms of Jewish piety and teaching people to neglect their families. Rather, when people care for their families, it must be **out of** obedience to Jesus, not instead of obedience to Him. To the third man, Jesus makes clear that His followers must give wholehearted allegiance to Him. They must not look back at what they left behind. This Holy Week, as we reflect on Jesus’ obedience to the Father and His sacrificial love for us, let us go out of our way to share the Gospel with pre-believers.

APPLICATION

What is the Holy Spirit saying to me about the changes needed in my life for me to truly follow the Lord Jesus?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for pastors and staff:
To truly follow Jesus and faithfully carry on His mission to the lost

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

¹¹ David E. Garland, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series On the New Testament*, vol. 3, Luke (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, ©2011), 415.

¹² David E. Garland, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series On the New Testament*, vol. 3, Luke (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, ©2011), 416.

WEDNESDAY, 12 APRIL 2017

The Cost of Discipleship

SCRIPTURE

Luke 14:25-35

OBSERVATION

What is true discipleship in the eyes of Jesus?

Deeper Reflection

Discipleship is never a theoretical abstract ideal but a hard reality.¹³ It is not meant to be entered into carelessly but thoughtfully, because discipleship is costly. Embarking on the journey of following Christ must not be a hasty decision.¹⁴ Just like how a master builder or a warring king must first spend time in careful and deliberate contemplation before undertaking a building project or declaring war against a rival king (vv.28-32), so must would-be disciples consider carefully whether they are prepared to forsake everything and everyone to follow the Lord Jesus (vv.26, 27, 33). In order to finish well and strong as disciples of Jesus, we must know that discipleship requires all of us. It is all or nothing. It does not mean we are to renounce all ties with our loved ones. However, it does require that all our earthly relationships be subordinated to our relationship with the Lord Jesus. It means stewarding our lives with reference and deference to Jesus. As such, one needs to make a realistic assessment of the cost and then make a sober decision to carry one's cross. We cannot sit on the fence, go with the flow or go through the motions. You see, an unwillingness to count and bear the cost of following Jesus has a disastrous outcome. We will lose our saltiness, that is, our distinctiveness and usefulness as Jesus' disciples to shine as His witnesses before a watching and waiting world (vv.34-35). God forbid such an outcome in our lives!

APPLICATION

What would be my personal cost of following Jesus this year and in the years to come? Take some time to consider, then in faith, pledge your allegiance anew to the Lord.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, please fill me with Your Spirit to bear the cross that You have in Your sovereignty allowed in my life. Help me not to be a disciple of convenience but of conviction. I want to be a disciple who loves and obeys You. Please empower me to have faith and courage to follow You and not to shrink back due to worldly pressures or even the threat of death. In Your name I pray. Amen.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:
- Pray for leaders:
- Pray for significant people:
- Pray for those in need:
- Pray for self:

¹³ Kenneth L. Barker and John R. Kohlenberger III, ed., *New Testament*, vol. 2 of NIV Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 262.

¹⁴ *Ev: Study Bible*, esv text ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Bibles, 2007), 1988.

THURSDAY, 13 APRIL 2017

Christ Our Example

SCRIPTURE

Philippians 2:3-8

OBSERVATION

In what ways did Jesus humble Himself?

Deeper Reflection

The Lord Jesus took a journey of self-emptying and self-humbling in order to look to the interests of others. Jesus who is the Master of all, became the servant of all.¹⁵ The apostle Paul highlights Jesus' attitude and exhorts Christians to imitate Jesus in that regard. Why? So that Christians can love and serve one another, and thereby shine as lights in the midst of a self-centred and self-promoting world filled with human pride and arrogance. As we serve others, we reflect Christ-likeness, a distinctive character and a better way of living. In the process, we point people to the Lord Jesus and His beauty and glory. We cannot imitate the attitude of Jesus by our human effort alone. We need the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Our hearts need to be deeply changed by God (Phil 2:13), to grow towards the same attitude of humility and service as Jesus. Our Lord submitted to the Father's will and humbled Himself to die even in a humiliating manner through crucifixion on a cross — a form of execution so cruel that it was banned for Roman citizens. Although Jesus had equality with God, He did not hold on to His divine privileges at all costs but had a mindset of service.¹⁶ To follow Jesus is to follow His attitudes, footsteps and choices. God may grant us opportunities to willingly let go of our rights, privileges and preferences in order to serve the interests of others. Sometimes, God may even allow us to go through humiliating situations, but it is in those defining moments when we continue to trust and obey God that He is most glorified.

APPLICATION

What area of my life is God leading me to let go of (or limit) my rights, privileges or preferences in order to serve the interests of others?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

¹⁵ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Philippians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1962), 106-109.

¹⁶ *Esv: Study Bible*, esv text ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Bibles, 2007), 2283.

FRIDAY, 14 APRIL 2017

In Christ Alone

SCRIPTURE

Philippians 3:1-11

OBSERVATION

What does “confidence in the flesh” (v.3) mean in the context of Philippians 3?

Deeper Reflection

The apostle Paul tells the Philippian Christians that their salvation comes only from their hope in Jesus Christ and not their religious conformity to the Mosaic law.¹⁷ Paul instructs them to “put no confidence in the flesh” (v.3). Although Paul himself has every reason to put his trust in his Jewish pedigree and religious performance, he counts everything a loss compared to “knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (v.8). In the past, Paul considered things like circumcision and obedience to the law as “gains”, but now he considers them as “loss”. Paul’s reversal of values happened as a result of his encounter with Jesus when Paul was on the way to Damascus to persecute Christians (see Acts 9:1-22). Jesus confronted and spoke to Paul. A bright light from heaven caused Paul to lose his physical sight for three days, but paradoxically Paul gained spiritual sight and true understanding. Soon all that mattered to Paul was his status in Christ, not his status from lineage and accomplishments. Paul’s spiritual status in Christ is that of a man possessing the righteousness of God, not through keeping the law but through trusting in Jesus. It is a righteousness “which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (v.9). Our confidence is in Christ alone, for through faith in Him we receive the perfect righteousness from God. New Testament scholar William Hendriksen said it well: “As long as one keeps clinging, even in the slightest degree, to his own righteousness, he cannot fully enjoy Christ’s. The two simply do not go together. The one must be fully given up before the other can be fully appropriated.”¹⁸

APPLICATION

To what extent am I still depending on my own righteousness or performance in order to be approved by God?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for lay leaders:
To know Christ and the power of His resurrection

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

¹⁷ Kenneth L. Barker and John R. Kohlenberger III, ed., *New Testament*, vol. 2 of NIV Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 804.

¹⁸ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Philippians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1962), 161.

SATURDAY, 15 APRIL 2017

The Cross of Christ

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 27:45-54; Luke 9:23

OBSERVATION

Why did the Roman centurion and guards say of Jesus, “Truly this was the Son of God!” (v.54)?

Deeper Reflection

The Roman centurion and guards were seasoned soldiers who were accustomed to the cruelty of Roman crucifixion and punishment of convicted criminals. We would not have expected the violence of Jesus’ crucifixion to surprise them, nor His death on the cross to affect them. However, there was something about Jesus’ death on the cross that was extraordinary. It was attended and followed by some unexplainable, supernatural events. Upon Jesus’ death, there was an earthquake and the tombs broke open. Following Jesus’ resurrection, many dead believers were raised to life and reunited with their family and friends. Hence this group of Roman soldiers exclaimed, “Truly this was the Son of God!” Remarkable! Gentile soldiers recognising that Jesus is the Son of God! This stands in great contrast to two groups of people who mocked Jesus’ identity as the Son of God: First, the general public who passed by the crucified Christ (Matt 27:40); second, the Jewish religious leaders who gathered to witness Christ’s crucifixion (v.43). The gospel writer, Matthew, makes this contrast a clear emphasis in his account. Jesus was not a mere man. He was not speaking blasphemy when He claimed to be the Son of God. As Christ’s disciples, we are called to share with others the truth about who Christ is and what He has done. In doing so, will we at times have to endure mocking, ridicule and rejection? Certainly. Are you willing to bear this cross? When mocking people see how you bear your cross and follow Jesus, may they come to see the truth that Jesus Christ is indeed the Son of God!

APPLICATION

What is the cross that I need to take up in order to bear the truth of the Gospel to particular family members, relatives or friends?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

SUNDAY, 16 APRIL 2017

SCRIPTURE

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OBSERVATION

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APPLICATION

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PRAYER

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THE PAST WEEK

Review

What was my high point and my low point for the week?

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What gave me life and what drained me?

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How was the Spirit of God at work?

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Reflect

What is one key thing that God said to me this week in light of what has happened?

Respond

What is one thing I need to do in light of what God is saying?
COMMIT IN PRAYER.

FAMILY DEVOTIONAL • WEEK 3 • APRIL 2017

WHAT IF JESUS DID NOT DIE?

Jesus died so that He can take away our sins.

Scripture: *Acts 2:22-24; 1 Peter 3:18*

★ ACTIVITY BITE

Speak to your parents about how a person can go to heaven. Ask them to tell you stories about their Christian relatives or friends who have passed away.

★ CHAT TIME

- Q1: From Acts 2:22-24 and 1 Peter 3:18, why was it necessary for Jesus to die on the cross?
Q2: What would have happened to us if Jesus did not die on the cross?
Q3: Could Jesus have chosen not to die? Why did He die then?

★ LEARNING POINT

Sin has separated man from God. The only way back to Him is for someone to take the punishment for sins. Jesus did just that — He died on the cross so that if we believe in Him, our sins are forgiven and we can come back to God the Father. But what if Jesus did not die? Could someone else have died instead? No one else is good enough to take away the sins of the world except Jesus. If He had not done so, our sins would not have been forgiven and we would be forever separated from God. But because of His great love, Jesus chose to die for us. We can now experience His love on earth and in heaven forever.

★ ACTION POINT

Together with your family members, sing a song of praise to Jesus for dying on the cross. Say a prayer for everyone to have a thankful heart towards Jesus every day.

★ PRAYER POWER

(Ask your children to pray after you.)

Thank You, Jesus, for dying on the cross for us. It would be scary if You didn't. I am very grateful for your love and I want to sing praises to You always. Amen.

MONDAY, 17 APRIL 2017

A Fundamental Choice That We Must Make

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 3:10-13; Matthew 7:24-27

OBSERVATION

What is Jesus' purpose in concluding His Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) with a parable of two builders (Matt 7:24-27)?

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Deeper Reflection

The rebuilding of the temple of God must begin with laying “the foundation” (v.10). The foundation is of fundamental importance when constructing a building and also to living a life. The foundation is “the most basic part of something from which the rest of it develops”¹⁹ and is essential for long-term stability for anything. Jesus concludes His Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) with a parable of two builders (Matt 7:24-27). He is calling us to make a **fundamental choice**. There are only two kinds of foundations in life that we must choose from: a solid one or a shaky one. One is from God, the other is not. We cannot avoid making the choice. There is no neutral ground. If we choose not to make a choice, then we have chosen a shaky foundation. Thereafter, for whichever foundation that we have chosen, there will be a **reality check**. The foundation of our lives will be severely tested; we will be “slammed” by the storms, floods and winds of life. It will certainly come. There is no escape. The only question is: Do we then find ourselves standing on and responding with the Word of God because we are living by it?

APPLICATION

How do I know if the foundation of my life is solid or shaky?

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PRAYER

Gracious Lord, teach me Your Word and give me understanding, that I may keep it with all my heart to the end²⁰ and grow in wisdom from Your Word. Establish my ways that I may live by Your Word and will not be ashamed when I look at it²¹, or be found spiritually wanting when I am tested through the storms of life. Amen.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

¹⁹ Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners, New Edition (Macmillan, 2002, 2007)

²⁰ Psalm 119:33-34

²¹ Psalm 119:5-6

TUESDAY, 18 APRIL 2017

“Why Do You Sleep, O Lord?”

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 4:24 – 5:1; Psalm 44:9-26

OBSERVATION

What does Psalm 44:9-26 tell us about the discipleship journey?

Deeper Reflection

We may sum up Ezra 4 in this way: the opposition to God’s rebuilding work was successful. The rebuilding of the temple “ceased” (v.24). The divine presence and providence in Ezra 1 to 3 suddenly seemed to have disappeared. God was silent throughout Ezra 4, and for the next 15 years until Haggai and Zechariah “prophesied” to His people (v.1). Ezra 4 raises “a disturbing theological question”²²: “Is God no longer in control? Are the people once again left to their own devices?”²³ This strange divine silence and “absence” is part of our discipleship journey — as articulated in Psalm 44. The Psalmist’s experience is summed up as “You have rejected us” (Psa 44: 9), which is described in Psalm 44:10-16. The Psalmist’s greatest theological tension is this: “All this has come upon us” even when “we have not forgotten You, we have not dealt falsely with Your covenant, our heart has not turned back, and our steps have not deviated from Your way” (Psa 44:17-18). A fourfold emphasis of his faithfulness to God! And quite naturally he asks (as do we): “Why, O Lord?” (Psa 44:23-24). But the last words of the Psalmist’s painful perplexity are “Your steadfast love” (Psa 44:26). We cannot be more faithful than God, can we?

APPLICATION

What is my understanding of the faithfulness of God?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for pastors and staff:
To know God’s sovereign freedom and wisdom

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

²² Mark A. Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (John Knox, 1992), 28

²³ Mark A. Throntveit, 28

WEDNESDAY, 19 APRIL 2017

There Must Be the Word of God

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 4:24; 5:1-2; Amos 8:11-12

OBSERVATION

What does the immediate progression of Ezra 5:1-2 from Ezra 4:24 show us?

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Deeper Reflection

The rebuilding of the temple “ceased” for 15 years. But it had become a crisis. God, not wanting this state of affairs to continue, was about to act. **God’s Word for Crisis:** In the text, what follows immediately after “it was stopped” (v.24) is “the prophets... prophesied to the Jews” (v.1). God spoke. We don’t know why God did not speak in the past 15 years. When we are in a crisis, what we need is the Word of God. But we may have to wait for or with the Word of God. And God speaks and acts at the right time. God spoke in “the second year of Darius” (v.24; Hag 1:1) “after he had put down a revolt [in Egypt] against his rule”²⁴. Had God spoken earlier and His people arose to rebuild the temple, Darius would have connected it to rebellion and opposed it.²⁵ **Crisis of God’s Word:** We need God’s Word, and God wants to speak to us. But what we must greatly dread is God sending “a famine” of His Word (Am 8:11), so much so that when we “go to and fro to seek the word of the Lord”, we “will not find it” (v.12). This was the result of Israel’s unfaithfulness to God. Let us treasure and seek God’s Word “more than gold, even the finest gold” (Psa 119:127, NLT).

APPLICATION

How do I show that I treasure and seek the Word of God?

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PRAYER

Lord, keep me from creating for myself a famine of the Word of God by not feeding on it with hunger. O that the critical life principle You have given us, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God” will not just be an idea that I know, but a reality that I live by. Help me, Lord! Amen.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

²⁴ Gary V. Smith, 58

²⁵ Gary V. Smith, 58

THURSDAY, 20 APRIL 2017

The God of the “Again”

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 5:1; Zechariah 1:7-17

OBSERVATION

What observations can you make about God from Zechariah 1:7-17?

Deeper Reflection

In the second year of King Darius, Haggai and Zechariah “prophesied to the Jews” to revive the rebuilding of the temple (Ezr 4:24; 5:1). In the 70-year exile, God used the heathen nations as instruments to judge His people. But these nations “inflicted harm on them far beyond” God’s “intentions” (Zech 1:15b, NLT). Moreover, these nations were flourishing and self-confidently secure in their own might (Zech 1:8-11, 15a), while Israel was downtrodden.²⁶ Against this backdrop, God was asked: “How long will You have no compassion for Jerusalem?” (Zech 1:12). Then, God spoke to His people through Zechariah with “gracious and comforting words” (Zech 1:7, 13): “I will return to Jerusalem with compassion” (Zech 1:16). In judging His people, God “was only a little angry” – in great contrast to Him being “very angry with the nations” (Zech 1:15b). And God will “again comfort Zion, again choose Jerusalem” and His cities “will again overflow with prosperity” (Zech 1:17). Mark the emphatic triple repetition of the word “again”. We can again be what God intends for us to be, even when we fail, again and again. Our God is the God of the “again”! For God is “exceedingly jealous” for us (Zech 1:14) with a “passionate and strong” love (Zech 1:14, NLT).

APPLICATION

What does it mean to me to know and walk with the Lord who is the God of the “again”?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

²⁶ Charles C. Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible*, Expanded Edition (Moody, 1986, 1995), 1462

FRIDAY, 21 APRIL 2017

“What Are You, O Great Mountain?”

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 5:1-2; Zechariah 4:1-7

OBSERVATION

What observations can you make about Zerubbabel and God from the Lord’s word to him in the context of rebuilding the temple (Zech 4:6-7)?

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Deeper Reflection

Through Zechariah, God spoke a word specifically for Zerubbabel, who was facing a “great mountain” (Zech 4:7). **External great mountain:** This refers to the successful opposition to the rebuilding of the temple that stopped it for 15 years (Ezr 4:1-5, 24)²⁷, and “any and every difficulty, however great, that Zerubbabel may encounter”²⁸. **Internal great mountain:** Zerubbabel, chosen by God to lead in rebuilding the temple, was leading God’s people strongly in resisting the opposition (Ezr 4:1-3). But somehow, he caved in to discouragement and fear, allowing the work to be frustrated to the point of being stopped altogether (Ezr 4:4-5, 24). A deep sense of failure probably gripped his heart. But 15 years later, God called Zerubbabel to lead again. And God assured him that “by My Spirit” the “great mountain” “will become level ground” before him (Zech 4:6-7). We are not told how the Spirit of God would do it. The great mountain before you may not be levelled so soon. But God alone knows what to do. And you can only depend on Him and trust and wait for Him. And rest assured, the end will be “How beautiful it is! How much grace the Lord has shown!” (Zech 4:7b).²⁹

APPLICATION

What are the great mountains in my life that I should entrust to God for Him to level them?

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PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for lay leaders:
To constantly live and serve “by My Spirit”

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

²⁷ Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (IVP, 1972), 121

²⁸ Barry Webb, *The Message of Zechariah*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (IVP, 2003), 91

²⁹ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nabum – Malachi*, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (John Knox, 1986), 126

SATURDAY, 22 APRIL 2017

“The Day of Small Things”

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 5:1-2; Zechariah 4:1-14

OBSERVATION

What is the significance of God asking “Who has despised the day of small things?” (Zech 4:10a) in the context of Zechariah 4:1-14?

Deeper Reflection

God asked: “Who has despised the day of small things?” (Zech 4:10a). The “small things” points to the “very small, fragile community, in a largely hostile environment”³⁰ living in “the small province of Yehud”³¹, attempting to do something apparently insignificant – rebuilding the temple. But God designated this as “the day of small things”, which the world despises. This is God’s delight and design (1 Cor 1:26-29). But the “small things” must be viewed from God’s perspective, as given in Zechariah’s vision of a solid gold lampstand with seven lights, and two olive trees beside it on each side (Zech 4:1-3). The two olive trees represent the two rather weak leaders, Zerubbabel and Joshua (Zech 4:11-14). The lampstand with the seven lights symbolises God’s people who are called to shine as lights in the hostile world³² (cf. Rev 1:12, 20; Matt 5:16-18), “alight with the presence of the all-seeing, all-knowing God, who dwells in their midst”³³ (Zech 4:10). We can shine as lights only “by My Spirit” — God’s empowering presence, not by our own resources or human resolve. “The day of small things” reflects the subversiveness of God — just like “the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” as “Jesus of Nazareth” (Jn 1:14, 45-46).

APPLICATION

In what way is my discipleship journey characterised as “the day of small things”?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

³⁰ Barry Webb, 93

³¹ Barry Webb, 36

³² Joyce G. Baldwin, 124; Elizabeth Achtemeier, 124

³³ Barry Webb, 92-93

SUNDAY, 23 APRIL 2017

SCRIPTURE

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OBSERVATION

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APPLICATION

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PRAYER

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THE PAST WEEK

Review

What was my high point and my low point for the week?

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What gave me life and what drained me?

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How was the Spirit of God at work?

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Reflect

What is one key thing that God said to me this week in light of what has happened?

Respond

What is one thing I need to do in light of what God is saying?
COMMIT IN PRAYER.

FAMILY DEVOTIONAL • WEEK 4 • APRIL 2017

MUST I GET A GOOD EDUCATION?

Gaining good knowledge is beneficial for God's work on earth.

Scripture: Proverbs 18:15

★ ACTIVITY BITE

Try reading a book in a language that you are not familiar with, for example Dutch or Burmese, and explain what it is about.

★ CHAT TIME

Q1: Why is it useful to know the language of the book you are reading?

Q2: What is the worst thing that could happen to you if you don't know how to read in any language?

Q3: How can knowing how to read and understand the Bible help us do God's work on earth?

★ LEARNING POINT

Gaining good knowledge is a blessing from God. Having knowledge about science and mathematics enables us to do good works like discovering new medicines for sicknesses that are hard to cure. We can create new machines that can help people do tough jobs or purify water in third world countries where clean water is lacking. We can even create jobs for many people to earn a living. Many of these are God's good works on earth. We can do them when we gather much knowledge through learning. Being able to go to school is a blessing from God and we should take every opportunity to learn as much as we can. Getting a good education also helps us to understand what the Bible says about sharing with others.

★ ACTION POINT

Think of something that you really want to be good at or some knowledge you want to gain. With the help of your parents or teachers, get some books or articles from websites that can help you grow in these areas.

★ PRAYER POWER

(Ask your children to pray after you.)

Thank You, Jesus, for giving us good teachers or people who can help us become knowledgeable in many areas. Help me to use my knowledge for the good of everyone on earth. Amen.

MONDAY, 24 APRIL 2017

When God Speaks, He Speaks Precisely

SCRIPTURE

Haggai 1:1-6; Numbers 28:11-15

OBSERVATION

What is the significance of God speaking to His people at the time of harvest (“the sixth month”) and on “the first day” of that month (vv.1-6; Num 28:11-15)?

Deeper Reflection

“**I**n the second year of Darius the king, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came” (v.1). This reveals something about the Word of God. God spoke “in the second year of Darius”: at a time after Darius had suppressed a revolt against his rule in Egypt. Had God spoken earlier to His people to resume rebuilding His temple and they obeyed, Darius would have connected it to rebellion and opposed it.³⁴ God spoke in “the sixth month”³⁵, which was “the time of the year when grapes, figs and pomegranates were being harvested”³⁶. But that year, the people had a scanty harvest — “You have sown much, but harvest little” (v.6). In fact, they experienced failure of their crops “in consecutive years”³⁷. God spoke on “the first day” of the month, when the people offered to Him the “new moons” offerings (Ezr 3:5; Num 28:11-15), and on the altar at the temple site that “was still a fire-blackened ruin (cf. 2 Kin 25:9)”³⁸ — a “reminder of the unfinished project”³⁹. God spoke with such precise timing and in these circumstances to His people about the condition of their hearts in neglecting His house (vv.2-4). Listen and discern what God is saying in **Scripture** through **specific situations** under His **sovereignty**.

APPLICATION

How am I listening to and discerning what God is saying in Scripture through particular circumstances under His sovereignty?

PRAYER

Lord, Your Word is a lamp to my feet, showing me how I should walk, and a light to my path, showing me where I should walk.⁴⁰ So, Lord, grant that each time I open the Scriptures, You will open the Scriptures to me.⁴¹ Open my mind to understand what I read.⁴² Open my eyes to see You in the Scriptures. Open my heart to respond to You rightly.⁴³ Amen.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:
- Pray for leaders:
- Pray for significant people:
- Pray for those in need:
- Pray for self:

³⁴ Gary V. Smith, 58

³⁵ Equivalent to our August/September

³⁶ Joyce G. Baldwin, 37

³⁷ Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Eerdmans, 1987), 61

³⁸ Elizabeth Achtemeier, 94

³⁹ Robert Fyall, *The Message of Ezra & Haggai*, The Bible Speaks Today (IVP, 2010), 146

⁴⁰ Psalm 119:105

⁴¹ Luke 24:32

⁴² Luke 24:45

⁴³ Acts 16:14

TUESDAY, 25 APRIL 2017

God's Word Is So Vitally Fundamental

SCRIPTURE

Haggai 1:1-2 with Ezra 1:1-5

OBSERVATION

What is the significant contrast in rebuilding the temple when comparing Haggai 1:1-2 with Ezra 1:1-5?

Deeper Reflection

In 538 BC, “everyone whose spirit God stirred” went up from Babylon to Jerusalem to “rebuild the house of the LORD” (Ezr 1:5). Then in 520 BC, God’s people said, “The time has not come for the house of the LORD to be rebuilt” (v.2). A day and night contrast has developed over 18 years. Israel had drifted away from God’s calling and purpose for them. This can happen to anyone of us. We can keep this from happening by learning from the four critical points in Israel’s subtle gradual drift. Israel’s call and mission of rebuilding the temple **begins with God’s Word:** “in order to fulfil the word of the LORD” (Ezr 1:1). Our discipleship must commence, continue in and be completed by the Word all the way. **God’s Word is replaced:** “the word of the LORD” (Ezr 1:1) is now replaced by “this people says” (v.2). What “this people says” flies into the face of what God says. One danger could be that we “substitute darkness for light, and light for darkness” (Isa 5:20). This happens when **God’s Word is forgotten.** The only way to turn back is to return **to God’s Word again:** “thus says the LORD of hosts” (v.2). We need constant “reminder”, even when we are “established in the truth” (2 Pet 1:12-13).

APPLICATION

How can I let the Word of God keep me from drifting away from being what the Lord intends me to be?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:
- Pray for pastors and staff:
To live by God’s Word vigilantly and fervently
- Pray for significant people:
- Pray for those in need:
- Pray for self:

WEDNESDAY, 26 APRIL 2017

“Your Priorities Are Wrong!”

SCRIPTURE

Haggai 1:2-4

OBSERVATION

What are some contrasting observations that you can make from verses 2 to 4?

Deeper Reflection

What God is saying to His people in verses 2 to 4 is: “Your priorities are wrong!” Observe four sets of contrasts here. Firstly, the contrast in “time”: When the people say, “It is not the time to rebuild God’s house” (v.2), they are essentially saying, “It is the time for us to live in our nice houses” (v.4). They have time for themselves, but no time for God. Are we not often also guilty of this? Secondly, the contrast in “house”: “your house” (v.4) and “the house of the LORD” (v.2). To the people, God’s house is less important than their own houses, and thus conveniently neglected. Thirdly, the contrast in “dwell” (v.4): the people have houses to dwell in, but not God. We cannot view the temple merely as a physical building, and fail to grasp its theological significance and reality: the presence of God. It is built “that I may dwell among them” (Exo 25:8) and “where I will meet with you, to speak with you there” (Exo 29:42-43). The people have lost the desire for God’s presence and meeting with Him. Fourthly, the people live in “panelled houses” — “nicely decorated houses”⁴⁴, but God’s house, which is to be filled with His glory (Exo 40:34-35; 1 Kin 8:10-11), “lies in ruins” instead (v.4).

APPLICATION

What are some of my wrong priorities in relation to God and what do I want to do about it?

PRAYER

God of all grace, keep me from becoming spiritually complacent, and descending to become spiritually delinquent and indifferent. I confess that I am prone to stray away from You like a lost sheep. Whenever I go astray, please seek Your child and restore me to Yourself. Be gracious and merciful to me, O Shepherd of my soul! Amen.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

⁴⁴ Mark J. Boda, *Haggai, Zechariah*, The NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan, 2004), 89

THURSDAY, 27 APRIL 2017

“Consider Your Ways!”

SCRIPTURE

Haggai 1:5-8

OBSERVATION

What does “Consider your ways!” in verses 5 to 8 tell us about God and His people?

Deeper Reflection

Twice God called His people who had gotten their priorities upside down: “Consider your ways!” (vv.5, 7). The expression literally means to “put to heart the paths you have walked”⁴⁵. It means: “Stop in your busy efforts to survive and ponder in your hearts what really is taking place.”⁴⁶ **Consider what went wrong:** The wages the people earned were “totally insufficient to cope with their material needs”⁴⁷, resulting in unsatisfied hunger, unquenched thirst and insufficient clothing to keep warm (v.6). These happened “in consecutive years”⁴⁸ with no serious reflection to look beyond the surface to the underlying causes. Not until now, when God graciously spoke in the face of such precarious spiritual complacency. “Consider your ways!” reveals the grace of God. For what happens if God is silent? Such grace calls for humility and honesty. **Consider what God wants:** God called for three progressive actions – “Go up...bring down...and rebuild” (v.8a). But God did not stop at that. Carrying out the three actions can involve just going through the motions. God desires that the actions flow out of a heart that seeks the pleasure and the glory of God (v.8b). A theocentric from-the-inside-out!

APPLICATION

In what ways is the divine call “consider your ways” applicable to me?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Achtemeier, 98

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Achtemeier, 98

⁴⁷ Pieter A. Verhoef, 62

⁴⁸ Pieter A. Verhoef, 61

FRIDAY, 28 APRIL 2017

How Do We View Reality?

SCRIPTURE

Haggai 1:5-11

OBSERVATION

How do verses 5 to 11 show that there is something deeper in reality than what appears on the surface?

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Deeper Reflection

Pragmatism is the way of life in today's world. If there is a problem, just analyse it, diagnose it and then solve it. This reflects how humans look at reality. From Scripture, we learn to view reality with a trifocal vision, as illustrated in verses 5 to 11. **What is happening externally:** There was a drought that affected the fields and hills, agricultural products, people and animals, and the fruits of human labour (v.11). **What we experience personally:** What happens externally does affect us personally. The drought means the people "have sown much, but harvest little" which had an impact on the basic needs of life: food, water, clothing and wages (v.6). **What is happening theologically:** This is most important. Behind all that happened externally and what was experienced personally by Israel was **God** – "I blow it away" (v.9) and "I called for a drought" (v.11). God has reasons for His actions, though at times He does not tell us what they are. This is God's sovereign right and freedom. In Israel's case, it was because in disobedience they failed to rebuild God's house (v.9). God acts by His Word. Drought was a covenant curse for covenant unfaithfulness (Deut 28:38-40). God is faithful to keep His Word, albeit in a negative way here.

APPLICATION

In what areas of my life do I need to make changes in the way I view reality?

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PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for lay leaders:
To be able to see as God sees

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

SATURDAY, 29 APRIL 2017

Gracious Condescension of Glorious Transcendence

SCRIPTURE

Haggai 1:2-6

OBSERVATION

What observations can you make about God from “the LORD Almighty”⁴⁹ insisting that His people rebuild His house (vv.2-6)?

Deeper Reflection

The temple was more than just a physical building; it was the place where the Presence of God abided. It was God dwelling with His people (Exo 25:8). Theologically, the rebuilding of the temple is the return of God’s presence to His people whom He was restoring to Himself. When the people were “living in luxurious houses while My house lies in ruins” (v.4, NLT), it indicates their lack of concern and interest in God’s presence with them. God’s insistence on His people to rebuild His house — even to the extent of bringing on them the covenant curse of drought, shows how much God “yearns to give Himself again”⁵⁰ to be with His people. It is like the exalted Lord Jesus knocking on the door of His self-sufficient and self-serving church in Laodicea, wanting to enter to “share a meal together as friends” with them (Rev 3:20, NLT). This God is “the LORD of hosts” (v.2), “the LORD Almighty” (v.2, NIV): “the highest and the most absolute Potentate in the whole universe”⁵¹ who is “not at all times available to human beings”⁵². The divine insistence on His people is the gracious condescension of the glorious transcendent Lord of the universe. Even when we lock Him out of our hearts, He still knocks on our door.

APPLICATION

What does the gracious condescension of the glorious transcendent Lord of the universe mean to me personally?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

⁴⁹ Or, “the LORD of hosts”

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Achtemeier, 97

⁵¹ Pieter A. Verhoef, 52

⁵² Elizabeth Achtemeier, 96

SUNDAY, 30 APRIL 2017

SCRIPTURE

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OBSERVATION

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APPLICATION

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PRAYER

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THE PAST WEEK

Review

What was my high point and my low point for the week?

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What gave me life and what drained me?

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How was the Spirit of God at work?

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Reflect

What is one key thing that God said to me this week in light of what has happened?

Respond

What is one thing I need to do in light of what God is saying?
COMMIT IN PRAYER.

FAMILY DEVOTIONAL • WEEK 5 • APRIL 2017

MUST I AVOID DISTRACTIONS WHILE DOING HOMEWORK?

Beware of the many distractions that can prevent us from doing our best.

Scripture: Colossians 3:23

★ ACTIVITY BITE

Try to read a page of a story book while your family members distract you by making noise, talking to you, tickling you or messing up your hair. Take turns to read and distract. Whoever completes reading the page in the fastest time wins.

★ CHAT TIME

- Q1: How did you feel when you were being distracted?
Q2: What are some common things that distract you when you do your homework? What are the consequences of being distracted?
Q3: How can God's Word keep us from distractions so that we can focus on doing important things?

★ LEARNING POINT

Distractions are everywhere. Some are things you dislike, for example the noise from the vacuum cleaner or a barking dog. However, there are fun distractions like games on computers, smart phones and chat messages from friends, or snacks. When you are distracted, you can't focus and this will hamper your learning. In the worst case scenario, you won't be able to complete your homework on time. In Colossians 3:23, we are told to work on everything with all our hearts. It also means to be focused and not allow any distractions to steer you away from giving your best in what you do for God. Be determined to put away any sources of distraction until you have completed your tasks.

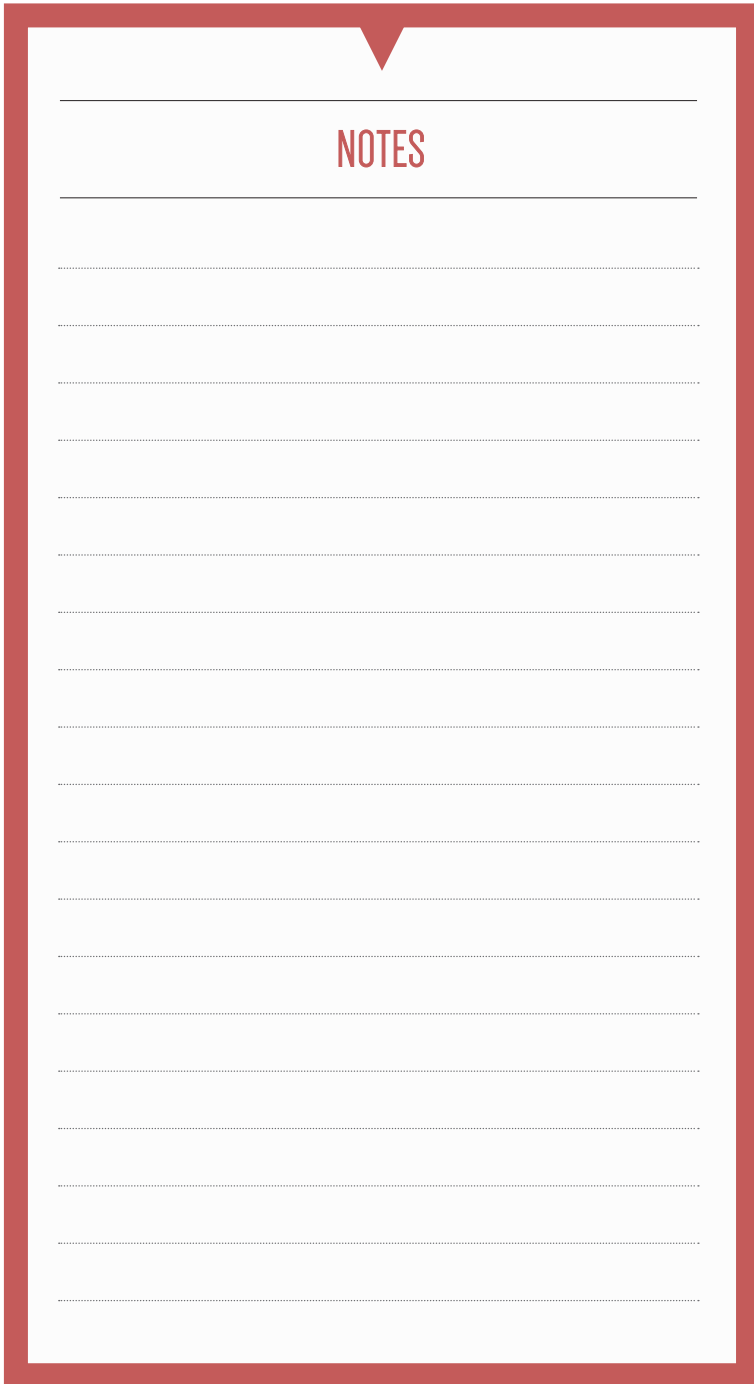
★ ACTION POINT

Name all the distractions that can take your focus away from studying or completing your homework. Ask your family members to help you remove these distractions.

★ PRAYER POWER

(Ask your children to pray after you.)

Dear God, I know that I can be easily distracted by so many things. Please teach me to stay focused so that I can do my best for You. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.



NOTES



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